

Especially for practitioners working with toddlers! 

Creating Young Storytellers

Storytelling and Listening

Introduce children early to the time-honored practice of storytelling. It is a great way for them to learn the basic structure of stories and to gain and practice new vocabulary. This practice guide suggests ways to promote a toddler's ability to enjoy storytelling and related activities.

What is the practice?

Toddlers above all love to hear stories about themselves or other family members. This gives them many chances to learn to listen and tell stories with and about important people in their lives. By starting with this focus of interest, toddlers become active participants in the development, telling, and retelling of stories.



What does the practice look like?

Repeated storytelling occurs any time a toddler repeats a story she heard from someone else or a story jointly made up by the toddler and an adult. A toddler might retell a story about what happened when playing with a friend. Retelling a story about a family trip to the beach is another example of repeated storytelling. Repeated storytelling expands a toddler's knowledge of how to put thoughts in order to form a story. It also increases the number of words they know how to use and their enjoyment of the art of storytelling.

How do you do the practice?

Many opportunities to take part in storytelling and repeated storytelling happen every day. They might occur when children are busy with favorite toys, engaged in a book, or looking out a window. Try some of these ideas for prompting storytelling:

- Start by picking out topics that are interesting to the child. If a toddler is interested in trains or a favorite pet, make up a story about one of those interests. The toddler is more likely to participate in the storytelling moment if she finds the topic interesting. Remember that toddlers often like to hear stories about themselves or about the important adults in their lives. The story of the day the child was born is a favorite of many children.
- Choose times and places for storytelling that are most likely to make it easy for the toddler to take part. A place where you can hear the toddler and she can easily hear you is helpful. The attention span of a toddler is not long. However, it helps to have some time when there will be few interruptions.
- Start the story, but quickly encourage the child to add information to the story. If this is a made-up story, ask the toddler to add details to the story. For instance, you could ask the toddler, "What's the dog's name?" The story may be about a real person or event. If so, ask the toddler for some information she knows about the person or event.
- Retell the same story during different storytelling sessions. With each retelling, ask the toddler to supply more and more of the story. Keep on doing this until she is able to tell the basic story on her own.
- The child might have trouble adding his ideas to develop or retell a story. Try providing two possible choices and let him decide how to continue. "Does Papa Bear say his bed is too soft or too hard?"
- Smile and respond to the toddler's efforts to keep her interested in the story.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Is the toddler repeating more stories?
- Does the toddler seem to enjoy telling stories or helping you tell them?
- Has the toddler tried to tell new stories when asked?

Take a look at more learning to tell stories

Toddlers Telling Stories

Jacque-Lynn, an early childhood specialist, likes to help classroom teachers encourage toddlers to become storytellers. She is talking with a teacher in a classroom of 2-year-olds about ways to include very young children in storytelling. It is spring in this rural farming community where most young children like the big farm machines. Jacque-Lynn and the teacher decided that toy farm machines and animals would be good to use with a small group of children. The teacher introduces the toy “props,” making sure the children know what they are. She then begins to weave a story with them. The teacher pauses and asks the children questions about the farm animals and equipment so the children become the storytellers.



Interest-Focused Stories

Ava’s mom looks forward to when her daughter’s home visitor comes. Their meetings are a great chance to get helpful information. Ava’s mom heard on TV that it was important to tell stories to little children. However, she does not know how since Ava is only 20 months old. The home visitor starts by helping Ava’s mom think of what Ava enjoys. Mom mentions that Ava’s favorite toys are her baby doll and her stuffed dog. The home visitor suggests that Mom start making up a story with Ava about her favorite toys. Mom asks questions about the story that Ava can answer to keep her engaged. She might ask, “Where is the baby’s hand?” or “Do you want the doggie to go for a walk?” Ava and Mom create and tell the story together.

Signs and Visual Cues

Dawn is a 2-year-old child who is hearing impaired. Her mother uses signs with Dawn to help her learn how to communicate. The home visitor who supports Dawn encourages Dawn’s mom to use props or pictures when telling a story. She suggests building the story around signs Dawn knows like Mom, Dad, red, dog, and cookie. Using a stuffed dog and a real cookie, Dawn’s mom draws her daughter into the storytelling by asking her questions with signs and gestures. Together they tell and sign a short story about the dog eating Dawn’s cookie.



Especially for practitioners working with toddlers!

A Picture Book for Learning

Storytelling and Listening

Before a child reads independently, she needs to engage in shared book reading to expand her understanding of the rules about printed material. Reading to toddlers strengthens their understanding of both printed material and oral language. This practice guide focuses on encouraging the use and understanding of printed material. It includes strategies to strengthen this important emergent literacy skill.

What is the practice?

Toddlers begin to learn how to read a book when sitting with an adult looking at and talking about the printed words and pictures. This exploration of books helps toddlers understand that printed letters and words have meaning.

What does the practice look like?

Help a toddler understand that the printed material (pictures, letters, words) in a book has meaning. This happens when you talk with the child while pointing out pictures, words, or letters that match what you are saying. Ask a toddler to find the picture of a dog while you point out the word dog in the text. This is an example of how to help a child make this connection.

How do you do the practice?

There are many opportunities for the sharing of a book with a toddler. These opportunities may include waiting for other children to arrive in the morning or waiting for a sister to come after school is out.

- Be sure the books are of interest to the child. Toddlers always seem to have one or two favorite books which you can have available. Also, do not hesitate to have some new books about topics that they like.
- As you talk about the book, point to pictures, words, or letters. For example, "This word is dog. Show me the picture of the dog." "This letter is A, and that is the first letter of your name, Albert."
- Sometimes when you are reading a sentence, put your finger under the words you are reading. This helps the toddler learn that our words are read starting at the left side of the page and moving to the right.
- As you "read" the book, let the child hold the book and turn the pages. Do not worry if pages get skipped. With a toddler, reading every page is not necessary. Letting the child hold the book and explore it encourages her active participation in the reading experience.
- Smiling and commenting on her exploration of the book or attempts to answer your questions shows her that she did well. A little encouragement will help keep her involved in the activity.



How do you know the practice worked?

- Does the toddler notice the printed words or letters as you talk about them?
- Does the toddler seem to enjoy looking at books with words?
- Does the child point to letters and words trying to say them?

Take a look at more ways to share books



"Find What I Say"

Matt is a toddler who likes looking at books with adults. Matt's home visitor taught Matt's mom a book game called "Find What I Say." It has become one of Matt's favorite games. Using a well-liked book, Mom points to a word and says the word. Mom then playfully says, "I don't think Matt can find the picture." Matt finds the picture, points to it, bursts out laughing, and joins the adults in applauding for himself.

"Reading" the Title

Once a week, David and his mom have a home visitor who comes to see how 22-month-old David is doing. The home visitor helps David decide which book he wants to read. Mom reads the title, *Goodnight Moon*, while she points to each word. She encourages David to repeat the title and David says, "Moon." The home visitor says, "Yes, you're right, 'Moon.'" Mom reads both words in the title again, pointing to the words while David says, "G'moon." The home visitor comments to David's mom that he seems to like "reading" the title of the book because he keeps asking for it.



Signs and Reading

Nina is a 22-month-old toddler who has a hearing impairment. Her mom uses both sign language and speech while they are looking at Nina's favorite books. While Mom reads, she signs and points to the words in the book. This helps Nina make the connection between the signed words and letters and printed words and letters. Nina likes her new alphabet book the best.

Especially for practitioners working with toddlers!

Reading Together Out Loud

Storytelling and Listening

Long before a child reads independently, he is able to engage in shared book reading with an adult. Shared reading will expand his vocabulary and interest in books. This practice guide includes strategies that strengthen these emergent literacy skills.

What is the practice?

Toddlers learn the principles of reading when they listen to, look at, and talk about the story in a book. This practice helps expand toddlers' listening and speaking skills. It will teach you how to encourage them, through your questions, to engage in a conversation with you about the story.

What does the practice look like?

When a toddler approaches you with his favorite book, it creates an opportunity to "read" together. As the story is read, stop frequently and ask the child wh- questions (Who? What? When? Where? Why?) Ask about the pictures or story to encourage him to talk about what he sees in the pictures or understands about the story. Ask wh- questions like "What do you see in the picture?" or "Where do you think the three bears will look next?" These types of questions will prompt him to talk. Be patient while he tells you about his ideas.



How do you do the practice?

There are many opportunities for sharing books with a toddler. Think about the activities in which the toddler is involved. Having his favorite books available during these activities helps create an opportunity to read.

- Start by identifying which books are the toddlers' favorites. Toddlers often have one or two favorite books you can have available, but do not hesitate to have some new books about things they like. Remember also to dig out books that are "old favorites" to read again. The more excited your child is about the book, the more he will learn from the reading experience.
- Whether working with a toddler in a childcare center or with a parent as a home visitor, ask the toddler which book he wants to read, or show him two books and let him choose.
- Ask the toddler to tell you what the story is about if it is a familiar one. If it is a new book, look at the pictures together and ask what he thinks the book will be about.
- As you "read," let the child hold the book and turn the pages. Do not worry if pages get skipped. When reading with a toddler, saying every word is not necessary. Just tell him the story as you go along. Encourage the child to talk with you about the story. Ask questions like "What do you think will happen next?" or "Why is the little girl crying?" Asking questions beginning with who? and what? encourages toddlers to talk more than if you ask yes-or-no questions like "Is the dog brown?"
- Show your interest in what the toddler says by following up his answer with another question. For example, "Do you think she is crying because she is scared?" "Why do you think she is scared?"
- Smiling and commenting on his attempts to answer your questions shows your interest and keeps him involved in reading.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Is the toddler able to describe more about the stories or pictures?
- Does the toddler want to "read" books with you?
- Does the toddler want to try new stories that you suggest?

Take a look at more reading together out loud

Book Talk

The home visitor watches as Natalie's mom gets a handful of books and asks Natalie which book she would like to read. While they are deciding which one to read, the home visitor encourages Mom to spend time talking with Natalie about the books. They talk about what they think the story is about just by looking at the pictures. The home visitor asks Natalie, "What do you think the name of the little girl is?" and "What do you think is happening in this picture?" Natalie picks a book she wants to hear and the home visitor starts a shared reading session.



Sharing Bedtime Stories

Ira's dad wants to know how to make the most out of reading books with his 2-year-old as part of their bedtime routine. He decides to ask his home visitor for some ideas. They talk about how getting ready for bed, snuggling together, and asking Ira which book he would like to hear can become their nighttime routine. They talk about the importance of following Ira's lead and of following up on Ira's answers to questions with more, related questions. The home visitor reminds Ira's dad to ask lots of w- questions, like "What does the boy do next?" or "Was the boy happy?" When Ira's dad tries these suggestions, he realizes that his son is enjoying the activity because Ira wants to talk about the story.

Patience Pays in Shared Reading

Dexter has a disability that makes it hard for him to say what he wants to say quickly. The home visitor who works with him and his mom thought that shared book reading might be a fun way to help him. Since Dexter often carries his books around, the home visitor asked Dexter's mom to let him pick a book he would like to read. Dexter chooses to read a book Mom already knows he enjoys reading. The home visitor suggests that Dexter's mom ask him questions about the book he chooses. Mom asks Dexter, "What is this book about?" The home visitor reminds Dexter's mom to wait patiently for Dexter to say, "Big dog." She smiles broadly and says, "That's right! It is about a big dog." Dexter's mom points to a picture in the book and she follows this up with another question, "What is the dog doing?" Again she and the home visitor wait patiently for Dexter to give her an answer. As they read the story, the home visitor comments on how patient Dexter's mom is about letting him get his thoughts into words. She also tells Dexter's mom how helpful it is to prompt only if Dexter cannot find an answer.



Especially for practitioners working with toddlers! 

Picture Book Fun

Storytelling and Listening

Looking at picture books with the toddlers in your care familiarizes them with books and book-reading behavior. Books that have only pictures or pictures with very few words allow children to feel confident learning to “read.” These books also introduce toddlers to print concepts.

What is the practice?

Making the connection between pictures in a book and the story helps toddlers develop a love for books and storytelling. Sharing picture books with toddlers builds their confidence with books. It teaches important print concepts such as reading from left to right and top to bottom.

What does the practice look like?

Looking at picture books can be a one-to-one activity or a group activity. In the classroom, supply your children with lots of picture books in all the centers. Provide books that cover a wide range of topics and interests. As a home visitor, you can use picture books to introduce children to storytelling and to elicit language. Actively engage the children in the reading activity. Ask questions about what is happening in the pictures and encourage them to tell a story.



How do you do the practice?

There are many ways to actively involve toddlers in looking at picture books.

- In a classroom, place picture books in easy-to-reach spots and in different centers, giving toddlers easy access to the materials. Picture books about houses or building can go in the blocks center. Put animal or bug books in the science center.
- Choose books that are easy for toddlers to handle, such as board books or oversized formats. Make sure they have large, colorful pictures.
- When looking at these books one-on-one or in small groups, use looking at the book as a context for conversation. Ask the toddlers what they see in the pictures, what is going on, and what might happen next. Picture books often have pictures that can tell a story in a number of ways. They are a good way to encourage your toddlers to use their imaginations.
- By talking about what you are doing as you look at picture books together, you help toddlers become more familiar with book rules. They learn how to hold a book, turn pages one by one, and that we read from left to right. With repeated readings, they also may start using “story conventions” in their storytelling—beginning with “Once upon a time...” or ending with “The end.”
- Make a homemade book with the toddlers in your class. Take a picture of each of the toddlers in your room and create a book. Toddlers love to look at pictures of themselves.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Are the children in your care asking you to reread a certain picture book?
- Have you found your toddlers “reading” picture books to each other?
- Do your toddlers seem to understand how a book is read, and echo some story conventions?

Take a look at more picture books and toddlers

Toddler Reference Library

In Casey's classroom, the toddlers have access to books in every learning center. Many of them are picture books, which the children especially enjoy because of the lively photographs or illustrations. In the manipulatives center, two boys consult a book featuring photographs of different styles of houses while building with Legos. In the blocks center there are books about cars and trucks. A group of children compares the pictures in a book as they play with their favorite toy models. In the art center, one child pages through an animal picture book before making an orange spider with play dough. The picture books are part of their daily routines. They give the children a chance to use books in both practical and enjoyable ways.



First Look at a New Book

Twenty-six-month-old Della loves playing with all the toys her home visitor, Breanne, brings on her visits. She especially enjoys the new books Breanne brings weekly. Della shows them to her mom immediately. "What've you got?" her mom asks, sitting down next to Della. "Breanne brought you a picture book. Let's see what's in it." They look at the pictures together, talking about what they see. Della's mom knows not to worry about reading the words yet. Instead, they focus on whatever captures Della's interest. She and Breanne ask Della questions as they look: What do you see? What's this little boy doing? Where do you think he's going? The three of them tell a story of their own using the pictures.

Making Books of Our Own

In Lesley's inclusive toddler classroom, she tries hard to make books accessible and enjoyable to all her children. One project her toddlers love is making their own books. She gives them magazines out of which to tear or cut pictures. Some children use adapted scissors. Lesley helps them glue their favorite pictures to sturdy construction paper. When the glue dries, she fastens their sheets together. She encourages the children to "read" their books. They read them back to her and to each other, using words or signs or a combination. Sometimes Lesley makes their books more "thematic," by providing only food magazines or only toy catalogs. Some of the children have already begun to "tell stories" with their handmade picture books. Others prefer naming their favorite objects on a page. Either way, they take pride in making their own books that they can "read."



Especially for practitioners working with toddlers! 

Letters and Books

Storytelling and Listening

Before children can learn to read words, they first have to recognize the letters of the alphabet. Alphabet books introduce toddlers to the letters of the alphabet and to the sounds each letter represents. Alphabet books help children become interested in the alphabet. They teach toddlers letter recognition, letter sounds, and words that begin with the same letter.

What is the practice?

Reading and sharing alphabet books helps children become interested in the alphabet by teaching letter recognition and letter sounds. Children who can identify letters and know different letter sounds have a large advantage in learning to read.

What does the practice look like?

When looking at alphabet books with the toddlers in your class, point to the letters as you read the book. "Sound out" the letters and encourage the toddlers in your class to do the same. Follow the children's interests. If your class likes sharks a lot, choose an ocean-themed alphabet book to spark their interest.



How do you do the practice?

There are many opportunities to read alphabet books throughout the school day.

- Put alphabet books in places that are easy to reach. Putting them in various activity centers allows toddlers easy access to the materials.
- Alphabet books come in many styles. Choose ones that are easy for the toddlers in your class to handle. Try board books or oversized books and look for ones that have bright, colorful pictures.
- Place a variety of alphabet toys around the room to reinforce toddlers' familiarity with letters. Some ideas include putting ABC stamps in the writing center and sponge letters in the water and/or art center. You could provide alphabet blocks in the block center and magnetic letters on the play appliances in the housekeeping center.
- When working with older "twos," ask the children to try forming the shapes of the letters with their bodies. They can do this on their own or as small groups. Children love to participate, and this is a great way to get them actively involved in the alphabet.
- Sing the Alphabet Song and other ABC songs with your class.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Are the toddlers in your class showing interest in books?
- Do they point to the pictures and letters in books?
- Do the students in your class often play with ABC toys?

Take a look at more fun with abc books and toys

Letters and Trains!

Nathan is 20 months old and loves when his home visitor brings fun books and toys with which to play. Nathan's favorite thing right now is trains. His home visitor shows him a new book about trains. Each page has a train and the first letter of that kind of train or train car on every page. The two join Nathan's mom on the couch. They take turns pointing out the trains, talking about where they have seen trains before, and saying some of the letters out loud. Nathan's mom reports to the home visitor that she and her son often look at books that same way. Nathan remembers more of the letters each time. This lets Nathan's home visitor know he is enjoying and learning from these kinds of activities.



ABC Book Activities

Cathy provides the toddlers in her class lots of opportunities to look at and talk about the alphabet. She adds new ABC books with different themes and appearances to the book corner regularly. The children enjoy selecting the books for shared reading. Cathy and her toddlers look at the colorful pictures and talk about what they see. Cathy emphasizes the initial sounds of the pictures' names. They trace each letter with their fingers and sometimes try to "draw" it in the air while they say it. They also talk about the beginning letters of their names. Cathy knows her toddlers enjoy these activities because they often bring the alphabet books to her to be read.

Touch-and-Feel ABCs

Lizbeth wants to make books accessible to all the toddlers in her inclusive class. In addition to regular books, she provides touch-and-feel books as well as oversized board books with tabbed pages. These adaptations make enjoying books easier for children with sensory impairments or trouble with fine motor skills like page turning. Lizbeth also has her class construct their own alphabet book. The children glue fabric and paper with different textures onto letters she draws on the pages. When the pages dry, they bind their book together. The children take turns touching, finger tracing, and talking about the letters they have made.

